

IV. Business Environment

As a first step followed in the strategic technology planning process, the County's business needs have been reviewed. These business needs were defined through review of each agency's business plans, interviews with Business Management Council (BMC) and Technology Management Board (TMB) members, surveys, and other internal County research. The business needs defined have been on a near term rather than strategic time horizon. The business goals, objectives, issues, opportunities, and directions identified anchor the planning project in terms of providing benchmarks against which the systems assessment, strategies, and plans will be developed. These components are related to one another in that goals and objectives provide a foundation from which to mobilize the development and implementation of directions and opportunities. Issues are problems or concerns that can stand in the way of an organization's ability to realize its goals or pursue opportunities. Ultimately, these business concepts will drive what technology decisions are made to move the County forward.

Results of the fact-finding work conducted in support of the technology strategic planning process revealed a number of common themes across agencies. Each of these areas is described further below, providing a summary of the lessons learned throughout this process. A table of compiled agency responses is attached as an appendix.

A. Strategic Goals and Objectives

Goals and Objectives Summary	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Improve/Expand services• Empower employees• Manage data and information• Optimize analysis, assessment, and improvement practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Establish communication and collaboration• Define metrics and performance measures• Strengthen project management• Ensure greater public awareness• Increase revenues and control costs

Strategic goals for each business area directly support the mission of each respective organization. Objectives represent the specific actions that an agency strives to undertake with respect to reaching its stated goals. These goals and objectives are typically updated on an annual or longer basis, and require a concerted set of projects and initiatives to achieve and sustain over time. Ideally, goals are specific, attainable, and timely, so that demonstrated progress can be gauged. Similarly, objectives denote the action-oriented tasks that have been delineated to accomplish the overriding goals. Goals and objectives require commitment, focus, and investment to achieve, with buy-in from top levels of management to ensure that goals are implemented. The goals and objectives identified by the agencies have been derived from the business planning documents that were submitted as part of the planning process. Because goals tend to focus at a high level of the organization, there are some core themes that emerged from the agencies' business plans. These themes are introduced below, with relevant examples and variations provided as appropriate.



1. Improve/Expand Services

A number of agencies had general goals related to achieving improved and/or expanded services. Components in this area included the following:

- Providing outstanding service to stakeholders/constituents
- Attaining service levels that are high quality and cost-effective
- Utilizing training, technology, and resources to attain excellence
- Providing timely and effective services

In addition, there is clear focus on improving service delivery, or how services are provided and administered. Specific objectives relate to achieving improved, enhanced, and expanded services and were presented as discrete, measurable components. These included efforts such as providing specific new education and employment opportunities, delivering economic support for vulnerable populations, etc.

2. Empower Employees

Another core value common to the organizations functioning within the County includes empowering employees. Without dedicated, knowledgeable, and committed employees, agencies cannot provide the most basic of services. Goals related to employees included addressing the employee environment in terms of being positive and productive, supplying employees with better tools and training to do their jobs, and relieving excessive workloads.

3. Manage Data and Information

Not surprisingly, most agencies are facing challenges in collecting, managing, and leveraging data and systems into useful information that supports decision making and efficient business practices. Goals in this area include the following:

- Increased data access
- Two-way communications with stakeholders
- Reliable, efficient, legally sound, and cost-effective databases
- Strengthened data integrity
- Clear information exchange between departments and with external partners
- Information systems that work in a reliable manner

4. Optimize Analysis, Assessment, and Improvement Practices

Beyond addressing day-to-day operations, agencies are hard pressed to find the time and resources to analyze processes and procedures, assess progress against goals, and plan and execute business improvements. Several goals identified in this area include the following:

- Finding resources to conduct policy analysis and program development
- Instituting best practices
- Establishing project governance structures
- Improving business processes by implementing enterprise applications



5. Establish Communication and Collaboration

Partnerships and collaboration provide a foundation to leverage other organizations' strengths through synergistic relationships. These opportunities are now being explored across divisions and departments, as well as with public entities and private organizations outside of the County. Examples of goals in this category include the following:

- Team-based initiatives
- Committed sponsorship from executive management, other stakeholders, and end-users
- Establishing collaborative relationships and regional partnerships that will last
- Integrated services, products, and facilities
- Improved cross-departmental coordination in technology and administrative services
- Development/implementation of strong communication systems

6. Define Metrics and Performance Measures

An objective noted frequently related to implementing performance measurement for the agencies. These metrics help management gauge progress against identified goals as stated in the business plans. In some cases, this objective identified particular performance metrics, while in others, the stated objective was to research and select a set of relevant measures and benchmarks.

7. Strengthen Project Management

Some of the agencies identified project management as critical for achieving their goals. In general, more robust project management techniques will ensure that schedules are met, costs are not unexpectedly exceeded, and projects follow an established and agreed upon set of tasks to ensure that key activities are not left undone.

8. Ensure Greater Public Awareness

In order for the agencies to achieve their stated goals, they must ensure that the public is aware of the services or information that they provide. In some cases, this revolves around marketing the services provided or increasing the public knowledge of a specific Web site. In other cases, agencies are tasking themselves with increasing public awareness of specific issues such as the Endangered Species Act (ESA) implementation.

9. Increase Revenues and Control Costs

In order for most entities to remain viable and operate cost-effectively, agencies are looking for ways to recover costs and become more self-sustaining. These objectives arose with respect to identifying alternate revenue streams as well as ensuring that the current revenue streams remain viable.



B. Directions and Opportunities

Directions and Opportunities Summary	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement technology initiatives • Reorganize and restructure • Improve processes • Utilize planning activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate and establish partnerships • Utilize cost-reducing technologies • Enhance skills

Each agency is pursuing a number of projects and/or initiatives in support of stated goals and objectives. Directions represent efforts that are underway; these are the “building blocks” used to achieve goals and objectives that have been identified at a higher level. Similarly, several circumstances were noted where agencies articulated opportunities. These represent the potential to enact positive change through concerted actions or projects. Categorical submissions in this area are described in overview as follows.

1. Implement Technology Initiatives

Not surprisingly, technology is being embraced as a tool to attain process efficiencies and provide expanded self-service. Initiatives noted include the following:

- Hardware and software acquisition/development related to improving business systems
- Providing increased access to information through technology initiatives
- Intranet development for increased access to and sharing of information
- Implementation of Web technologies for providing services online
- Database development and maintenance to ensure standards and efficiency
- Data resource management initiatives (data modeling, definitions, etc.)

2. Reorganize and Restructure

Many offices are retooling. These efforts include redirecting staff efforts through reorganizations, as well as physical remodels and relocations. The following are some specific examples:

- Technical services reorganization to consolidate efforts into a single section within the agency
- Reallocating staff time on information-sharing activities to eliminate duplication of efforts and streamline processes

3. Improve Processes

Often, existing business processes and procedures have grown organically and are not ideally suited to meet current business needs in an optimal way. Process improvement efforts seek to address these shortcomings and address high-priority, high-risk, high-cost processes through streamlined, more automated, efficient alternatives. Numerous projects underway include the following:

- Implementation of improved business practices
- Records management workflow improvements



4. Utilize Planning Activities

Projects currently being planned and monitored constitute a significant portion of the items identified in the County business plans. These activities include planning as well as performance measurement initiatives to assess progress against planned objectives. Examples include the following:

- Planning for a comprehensive, integrated regional information system
- Planning for wireless communication applications
- Building capacity (knowledge, skills, and resources) to enable strategic planning
- Building/implementing business plans focusing on innovation

5. Integrate and Establish Partnerships

Agencies have recognized the opportunities they have for improving efficiency by integrating efforts across agencies and departments. Those noted within the planning documents reviewed include the following:

- Achieving economies of scale through pooled procurement functions
- Improvements in customer service
- Knowledge transfer and staffing efficiencies through staff sharing/loaning programs
- "One-stop shopping" for services

6. Utilize Cost-Reducing Technologies

Technology-based tools and solutions are evolving in their availability and functionality. This includes both Internet- and Web-based applications, as well as increasingly sophisticated software solutions. Related to the Internet, King County agencies are quick to note that Internet use is high in the public audience. Reasonably, many agencies have articulated the opportunity Web technologies bring for improving services and efficiency. Similarly, other software tools are available to support best practices. Particular opportunities noted include the following:

- Allowing better public access to service information
- Linking County agencies to other providers of similar services
- Increased staff utilization

7. Enhance Skills

Training presents the opportunity to make existing staff resources even better at what they currently do. In addition, training can often provide staff with capabilities to do more than what they currently do and function more efficiently and effectively. Training opportunities delineated in agency planning efforts include the following:

- Decreasing staff turnover
- Increasing staff morale and effectiveness
- Increasing staff utilization



C. Strategic Issues

Issues Summary	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Funding Constraints• Increased Need for Services• Training Needs• Loss of Knowledge Capital• Downsizing Staff• Partnership Challenges• Efficient/Effective Use of Technology• Adequate Resources/Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Management of Technology Development and Implementation• Demand for Increased Public Information• Dated Processes and Workflow• Changing Environment and Business Models• Need for Standards

Strategic issues represent the key challenges or problems that directly impact an agency's ability to achieve the stated mission and strategic goals. The following has been distilled from business plans and documents, and interviews with the agency management and staff, as well as surveys distributed to Technology Management Board (TMB) members.

1. Funding Constraints

The Pacific Northwest region recently experienced a dramatic period of economic growth. Now the region, as well as the country overall, is facing a severe economic contraction. Increased pressure on public agencies has resulted — populations have increased, the tax base has constricted, and unemployment rates are on the rise. In addition, recent voter initiatives, as well as annexations and incorporations, have reduced revenues that support County services. Resulting budget cuts have been felt across the board, and County government is facing the need to “tighten its belt.” So, at the same time when the resources available to provide public services are diminishing, the need for such services is steadily increasing.

2. Increased Need for Services

County agencies must effectively deliver services that are needed by the public to maintain safety and quality-of-living standards in our community. The need for these services is increasing in the current economic environment at the same time that the resources available for delivering these services are contracting.

3. Training Needs

Many agencies are faced with staffing cuts, while at the same time being tasked with delivering increased services — often to an expanding client base. Within this context, finding the resources for appropriate training for staff to provide them with the skills and knowledge they need to “do more with less” becomes increasingly important.



4. Loss of Knowledge Capital

It is difficult for some public entities to maintain technology staff, given the higher salaries and benefits that are generally available in the private sector for technical skill sets. In addition, some key technology staff have recently retired from the County, taking their in-depth knowledge and experience with undocumented, custom systems with them. With this high staff turnover, agencies face the challenge of having a majority of their staff on a learning curve. Many agencies have also had the situation in which, once staff get marketable skills, they are apt to seek more lucrative employment opportunities elsewhere. As a result of this turnover, as well as the loss of staff due to retirement, the County is continually facing the loss of knowledge within its operations.

5. Downsizing Staff

Most agencies are either downsizing or maintaining same-level staffing numbers to address funding reductions. Maintaining service levels while downsizing staffing levels is a challenge.

6. Partnership Challenges

Agency goals are often achieved through the use of strategic partnerships established with other public agencies or private organizations. These partnerships take time to establish and manage, but may offer payback over time through increases in efficiency and synergies between entities with a shared purpose.

7. Efficient/Effective Use of Technology

Information technology provides a set of tools to meet business objectives. However, if not planned and managed effectively, technology implementation will support processes and practices that create organizational imbalances such as redundant systems that require reconciliation, duplicative data entry, and increased training, support, and maintenance costs.

8. Adequate Resources/Facilities

In addition to meeting core service needs, agencies are challenged to maintain the base of physical infrastructure (buildings, treatment plants, technology, etc.). This requires commitment of resources that could otherwise go to primary service delivery.

9. Management of Technology Development and Implementation

Technology projects need to be coordinated to ensure that they are conducted with the right resources and that they are being created in response to agencies' most pressing business issues. Development projects may address a single agency's needs or may involve or affect more than one agency. In either case, it is important to manage each project against a clear plan that delineates the scope and extent of the project outcome.



10. Demand for Increased Public Information

Many agencies provide services and information directly to the public. Having the ability to communicate effectively with the public — either to make users aware of the services that are available to them, or to provide education that helps constituents understand issues that can directly impact their quality of life, such as health, environment, and housing concerns — is an important issue for many agencies.

11. Dated Processes and Workflow

Often, existing workflows have evolved organically, usually in support of older, manual processes that have been in place for as long as anyone can remember. Or processes may be implemented because they work best with the tools and systems that are available to perform them and meet the policies that have been promulgated. In some cases, processes can be streamlined without updating the information technology tools available; for example, a change in policy can sometimes facilitate the necessary change. Reconfiguring an existing process usually brings a short-term hit to efficiency as a new process is designed and implemented, and agencies are generally reluctant to make workflow changes until there is a compelling reason to do so.

12. Changing Environment and Business Models

The process of implementing change is disruptive and requires careful management to avoid potential negative side effects (decrease in productivity, extended learning curve, etc.).

13. Need for Standards

It is a challenge to select and implement technology standards within and across agencies. Standards, in the long run, can help to make technology use, as well as maintenance and upkeep, more streamlined. However, in the short run, there are challenges to migrating existing components onto the selected standards and a learning curve when system upgrades or different versions are rolled out.